

## REFLECTION PAPER

## 1. Prologue - Starting Point

Explore Lab is the studio in which I decided to develop my graduation project. The reason that led me to apply for it is twofold: firstly, it is the only graduation studio that allows you to explore, analyse and develop a topic that fascinates you; secondly, it offers you the opportunity to exercise your skills in the definition of a coherent architectural process that is to succeed in the development of a research that evolves and is translated into an architectural design. In my opinion, by looking to the future, Explore Lab offers a solid exercise in preparation of the forthcoming entrance in the labour market.

Everything starts with a fascination, a general idea that during the year takes shape into an architectural proposal. In my case, the fascination has related with the city of Venice, the Italian island which fame is currently depending more on its present condition than on its aesthetical beauty. It is common knowledge that it represents the symbol of the difficult relationship between cities and tourists, *stones and travelers*: the situation in which the city is transforming into a productive machine in its own consuming. It is by acknowledging this present condition that I was intrigued in analysing the city of Venice, by trying to understand what can be done, as architect, in order to affect its condition, with the aim of positively affecting its future. The city is in fact currently experiencing a process of museumification, influenced particularly by the dynamics of overtourism, a phenomena that is simultaneously transforming the city and maintaining its historical beauty through the money it generates: the depopulation of Venetian residents, the transformation of the building stock into accommodation facilities and the exploitation of its inherited beauty represent just the tip of the effects of overtourism's dynamics. It is only by understanding these dynamics that has been possible for me to develop an architectural design coherent with my research.

## 2. On the relationship between research and design

### 2.1 Overview

By starting from the individuation of the problem statement, the research has been structured in three parts. In the first one, the topic of overtourism is introduced, by trying to dissect the dynamics of such phenomena and the way in which it became one of the most important economical engine in current times. Therefore its consideration as an industry has been crucial to understand and look at the phenomena through a different perspective: overtourism as a product (an effect) and not as the cause of the problematic character of Venice. Such feature is presented in the final part of the first chapter, where it is displayed the present situation of Venice and its ongoing transformation driven by the dynamics created by overtourism. Particularly, in the development of this research I have decided to focus on the 'ephemeral permanence' of the majority of travelers in the island, therefore in the disbalance of the spectrum of permanence of the different characters that are experiencing the city. Such trait is the one I have decided to tackle further on in the development of my design.

The second part of the research represents its main body, and develops the answer to my research question:

*“By looking at the morphology of the city, what are the urban elements of Venice that affect the condition/the extent of ‘overtourism’?”*

Through the theoretical framework of the 'technicities' developed by philosopher G. Simondon, this part explains the dynamics behind the transformation of the city

by analysing some of its urban elements that in my opinion has affected not only the transformation of the island through time but especially the extent of its problematic current situation. Therefore, through the analysis of the *limits*, the *infrastructure*, the *open spaces* and the *nodes* it has been possible to comprehend both the signature traits of the city and the productive terms through which Venice is affecting its own present condition. The product of such condition is the high specialisation of the city in the touristic sector, directed entirely towards those visitors who experience Venice for short, ephemeral period of time, who constitute the majority of the travelers in the city. It is in this last chapter that the relationship between research and design is displayed. By focusing on the reasons why people stay for short period of time in Venice it has been possible to define a frame through which developing a solid design proposal to test how the present condition of the city can be positively affected via architectural terms.

The reasons identified are three. The first one is related with the costs: staying in the historical centre is too expensive, a consequence of the fame of Venice and the high numbers of visitors who wants to visit it. Therefore, long stays in the island cannot be afforded so easily by everyone.

The second one is the commercial image of Venice, the general idea that visitors have about the city: most of their time is spent in the historical centre of Venice, both because of its celebrated beauty and the visitors' unawareness of the extension of what the city really is: the Metropolitan City of Venice comprehend in fact the entire lagoon, with its different islands, and the mainland that overlook it. It is inside this frame that it is possible to understand how the common idea of Venice is relative, because just confined in its historical centre: Marghera, Mestre, Lido, Murano, Burano are as well contributors in the definition of the Venetian character, showing different facets of the city, underdeveloped and overcome by the beauty of the complexity and stratification of the historical centre.

The third reason relates with services: Venice does not offer anymore the needed services for a long stay in the island. To the beautiful historical centre with underdeveloped services is opposed the ugly outskirt with potential services. The entire mainland in fact is composed by cities that have no identity on their own, but they are identified as outskirt of the centre of Venice. The character of the island is so strong that influence the same identity of the other urban agglomeration of the Metropolitan City of Venice. Therefore the dichotomy between the historical centre of Venice and its outskirts is so strong that the city lacks that intermediate zone where, in other cities, houses and common activities are located. And it is precisely in this buffer zone that architecture can develop a strategy to affect the permanence of stay of the Venetians visitors, by transforming an area that can contain both characters: the industrial feature and the morphological characteristics of Venice.

I consider this realisation the keystone in the relation between research and design: the understanding of Venice not merely as an island, but as an assemblage of the historical centre and the mainland, with a mutual influence between these two realities. What happens on the main island affects the mainland and viceversa: Venice has to be considered as a unique system that cannot be recognise in its singular parts. The decision therefore to choose a design area outside the historical centre of Venice is the point of connection between my research and the design, the moment in which I have realised the real nature of Venice.

From the claiming of the current situation, it derives the logical reason behind the proposal: because the misbalance in the spectrum of people's different gradient of permanence in Venice represents the problem to tackle, how can we affect the short permanence of the people via architectural intervention ? Is it possible nowadays to intervene in

underdeveloped and abandoned industrial area of the Metropolitan City of Venice in order to create an intermediate zone that could host both the reinterpreted aesthetics of Venice and its industrial character, therefore could offer services for a long permanence? Is it possible to regenerate the area on the mainland in order to make it attractive not only for its new aesthetically experience but especially for the creation of social conditions through which developing a new collective on the island ? These questions define the basis upon which my proposal develop.

## 2.2 The Project Area

The area identified for the development of my graduation project is the 'Isola dei Serbatoi' (Storage Tanks Island), one of the island of Porto Marghera that represent a filter between the industrial area and the lagoon facing the historical centre of Venice. In its current state, the island is completely abandoned and host empty oil tanks not in use anymore.

The decision of intervene in this island follows its strategic location both in being in the transitional zone that do not belong neither to the historical centre or the outskirt of Venice and in the transformation of the cruises trip to reach the historical centre, not anymore entering in the lagoon from the 'Bocca di Lido' but instead using the existing canal of Malamocco-Marghera, through the south entrance in the lagoon. Marghera therefore will represent the first stop in the touristic route, that only at a later stage could reach the terminal on the historical island of Venice.

The Storage Tank Island lays at the intersection of these two canals, making it a location worth to be enhanced and regenerated not only as an expansion of the city of Venice (inherent to the same nature of Venice, a city of relationship, an archipelago) but also as a gate to the historical centre. From this definition, it results evident that the island won't be a self independent reality but it will function as a satellite in combination with the historical centre of Venice.

## 2.3 The Critical Approach

The bottom line of the exploration

The exploration perpetuated with the project aims to understand and test the way in which the permanence of visitors in Venice can be affected via architectural terms. The theoretical approach adopted to reach this goal is the one of developing an exploration of the logics that undermine the characters of the city of Venice, therefore their understanding and transposition into a modern design. It is important to clarify that such exploration is not an aesthetical re-interpretation of Venice but the opportunity to test how the assemblage of the city can evolve without being stuck in its picturesque idea.

Therefore, the value that I am researching is the understanding of Venice as an assemblage, as a combination of different layers which relationship define the character of the city. Its dissection and application in modern time is the value I will try to pursue in my design.

## 2.4 The Theme of Beauty

Not only the understanding of Venice through its technicities has been crucial in its total understanding and in the definition of the basis for my proposal but especially for claryfing the intellectual reason behind the project, my personal commitment to the design. The belief behind the application of the logics that characterise Venice is in fact based on the idea that their relationship, therefore the creation of the assemblage, is what determines the *Venetian beauty*. In this specific context, beauty is intended through two different facets: the *digital beauty*

*and the ideal of beauty*<sup>1</sup>. The first one relates with the contemporary idea of smoothened beauty, that is the pure consideration of an external object through the instant like/dislike comment. The social, economical, historical complexity usually immanent in the object is flattened to a simple reaction determined by the exterior aspect of the object and the consequent instant pleasure felt by the subject. The second one relates with a more intellectual idea of beauty, the one that does not relate merely with instant pleasure, but that through the lingering in contemplation elevates the subject, creating a free relationship with the object without the need of possess it or desire it. The perception of an external object is substituted by its contemplation. It is only by contemplative distance, therefore with time, that real beauty can be comprehended.

It cannot be denied that both of these facets affect the image of Venice and influence its image, by making it even more attractive for the visitors: therefore, the idea that beauty is one of the main motif that attracts visitors in visiting a location is taken as a conceptual base for the development of a project. It is important to understand what is beauty in the Venetian context and by what is determined in order to define the new design proposal upon logics that could aim to attract visitors and release the pressure of overtourism on the main island.

I strongly believe that the aesthetical beauty of Venice, by meaning the exterior character of the city, is just a limited aspect of the inherent beauty of the city, and that it has not to be taken as a basis of comparison in the development of the new proposal. In fact, it is important to notice that the idea of beauty in Venice never relates with a single act, but with its totality: Venice attracts visitors because of the uniqueness of its totality, not just for its singular monuments. Therefore, it is the inner reason of its parts and their relationship, that result in its urban configuration, that constitute the real beauty of the island. The pure aesthetic reflects the positivity and smoothness of the idea of beauty nowadays, a kind of beauty that is important to oppose with the knowledge that govern its reasons: "*Knowledge also contain negativity in the sense that it is often gained against a resistance*".<sup>2</sup> Expressing this negativity and clash with the common imaginary of Venice is important in order to introduce a new kind of beauty in the design, the one of its logics. Beauty that I have identified in the definition of the city through its technicities: the *limit*, the *infrastructure*, the *open spaces* and the *nodes*. The logics that regulate their relationship is what have created Venice in its totality, and therefore its real beauty.

It is by considering this particular idea of beauty that the project does not aim to copy/reproposed/translate the aesthetical character of the historical city. The formal results may deviate from what Venice is in the general imaginary, but the logics will be perpetuated.

### **3. Elaboration on research method and approach in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry**

Because the chair of Explore Lab gives you the freedom in developing your graduation project, it is up to every student to choose the methodology through which defining the research and the design. Personally, I decided to develop a qualitative research in the form of an essay, supported by theoretical considerations and literature studies. The first six months of the graduation year has been the one of the definition and advancement of my research, where my fascination has constantly become more accurate and clear, through the constant discussion with my tutors and the feedback I have received from them. The process has not be linear, but it has been characterised by continous back and forth, questioning my beliefs and certainties and exploring different facets of the topic. The several reading of theoretical texts has helped me in acquiring

1 cfr. Byung Chul Han, 2018, *Saving Beauty*, Cambridge, Polity Press

2 Byung Chul Han, 2018, *Saving Beauty*, Cambridge, Polity Press

new knowledge and therefore considering the problem through a different perspective. In fact, from addressing 'overtourism' as the problem of the current condition of the city of Venice, I have been able to change my problem statement by identifying one of the effects of overtourism that is heavily affecting the transformation of the city of Venice: the ephemeral permanence of visitors in the main island. This represented the starting point for developing an architectural design that had the purpose of affecting the short permanence of the majority of visitors in Venice, by consequently having an impact on the future transformation of the city of Venice. The realisation of the shift in the problem statement came quite late, during the P2 discussion, but it has defined the basis upon which my project could start and be developed in the following six months.

Regarding the design, the methodology that I applied is the one of analytical drawing, through which developing and clarify my architectural proposal. The constant use of architectural and artistic references constitutes the base of my design methodology, that does not aim to innovation in terms of creativity but instead it favours the understanding of the important characters of existing architectures: not a mere copy, but a reposition in present times of the values that those architectures contain. This is what fascinated me in developing a design, and the feature I decided to apply and strengthen in my graduation project.

#### **4. Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework**

The relevance of the topic analysed in my graduation projects lies in its contemporaneity: the delicate relationship between overtourism and cities is a phenomena that is increasingly affecting the way in which cities are transforming, both on a morphological and social level. Because of a lack in the theorizing of the definition of clear methodologies that could be applied to face such problematic transformation, I think it is important to foster the debate around the future of our cities, especially the ones that are being engulfed by the overtourism's dynamics. Therefore, I have considered my graduation project as an occasion to dissect these dynamics and test what we can do, as architect, to positively affect the future transformation of the cities. Crucial to my project is the fact that both the research and the design do not have to be considered as a method for the definition of a general solution for all the cities that are experiencing the topic tackled, but the opposite: the foundation for the development of an architectural proposal for the Venetian context, with the aim of invigorating the international debate around the topic of overtourism and cities' transformations. In this frame, Venice has been taken as a case study, as a specific situation through which test the potentiality of architecture in dealing with the dynamics of overtourism.

#### **5. Ethical issues or dilemmas you may have encountered in the research, elaborating the design and potential applications of the results in practice**

The process that led me to the definition of the research and the design has not been linear. The continuous questioning of my beliefs, the uncertainties, the new discoveries have together characterise my process and challenged my intellectual position. I have to recognise that the dilemmas created during my process has helped me in improving it and made me realise new facets and perspective on the topic I had analysed. Revelations is what has characterised my entire process.

P2 has been the crucial point of my graduation process. It is in this moment that I have had my first important realisation: the object of my research (Venetian technicalities) was something more than what I have always considered: not only in fact they were the urban elements that affected

the extent of overtourism on the main island of Venice, but they represented also the character of uniqueness of the city. The realisation of the dichotomy of such elements was crucial for my project, especially in linking the research into the design.

During P2 also my belief in addressing overtourism as the main cause to the present condition of Venice has changed where, after discussions with the tutors, the phenomena started to be defined from a different perspective: overtourism as an effect, as a product of political and economical choices made by the city of Venice throughout its course. This redefinition of overtourism helped me in developing a more clear strategy for the development of my design, defining a clearer target and function, that once again has been characterised by several revelations during its process. First of all, the change in the consideration of Venice from its historical center to its entire compound: the mainland, the lagoon and the infrastructure that connects them. By looking at a broader spectrum I have realised the real extension of the city of Venice, by questioning myself regarding the site for developing my project. Is a project on the main island what Venice needs in order to affect the overtourism's dynamics that are influencing its present condition? As an atrophied muscle that can be cured by involving the surrounding tissues and needs their strengthening to minimize the damage, I realised that the outskirts of the city could be the optimal area for developing the design, having the condition to affect positively the present condition of Venice; and especially after having realised that the present condition of the historical centre of Venice has been influenced and in turn influence its outskirts, as a unique assemblage, I took the decision to not consider the historical centre and developing the design proposal on the outskirts of Venice. From here, new design themes developed, extremely important in the broader architectural present discussion: the theme of the big scale in architecture, the restoration of industrial areas, the relationship between human dimension and post human scale are all topics that I had to deal with in my graduation project, by challenging myself into problematics that I was not familiar with.

To conclude, this project enabled me to confront myself with challenges that I had never face before during my architectural journey. Not only I am satisfied with the new knowledge acquired during the process but I am also confident that I will carry it on in my future professional career for their relevance and importance in the present architectural debate.





Isola dei Serbatoi, Marghera